

The Eastern Curlew by Harry Saddler

The 2,300 kilometre Great Barrier Reef is cherished by all Australians, but I think there is another at least equally amazing product of evolution that stretches thousands more kilometres north and south of the reef from Siberia to New Zealand. I suspect very few Australians have even heard of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. The flyers of this flyway are rather nondescript birds. They are not birds that capture attention with song like the Golden Whistler or colour like the Rainbow Lorikeet or aerobatics like the Bee Eater or sheer magnificence like eagles or albatrosses. They unobtrusively arrive from their northern summer breeding grounds in Siberia on our shores in our late spring and, seeking out crustacea and worms in the intertidal zone, few of us would even notice them. There is much in nature to fascinate but surely nothing more fascinating than these birds that make 20,000 kilometre annual pilgrimages - the moon and back in their lifetimes.

The Eastern Curlew is the largest and the least nondescript flyer of the flyway and Harry Saddler's eponymously named very well researched bird book tells us all there is to tell about this remarkable avian traveller and much about the phenomenon of bird migration in general.

Growing up in Canberra, Harry started his ornithology with his "Field Guide to the Birds of Australia" by Simpson and Day in our limestone plains and wooded hills and on trips to the family holiday coast house at Brogo. My father's old "An Australian Bird Book" by J A Leach was already overtaken by Neville Caley's "What Bird is That?" by my 60s boyhood ornithology. My birding mates who had Caley looked down on my Leach, but being much smaller and, my having covered it with yellow vinyl, it was a more practical weather proof field guide.

Bird books get out of date because we learn more, but, also because they have to report changes. A very sad change over the decades since my early ornithology is that my encounters with Eastern Curlews around Lake Coila at Tuross and elsewhere in the 60s were unexceptional. There were plenty of them. They are now classified as critically endangered. Harry's book spells out the threats to the Eastern Curlew and all ornithologists, amateur and professional, should read it as should anyone interested in environment protection. Harry is completely convincing of the significance of the loss of this special bird. If we lose it by what humans are doing locally and globally, just as we might lose the Great Barrier Reef, we will almost certainly lose a number of others of its Siberian summering companions also dependent on mudflats at the sea's edge in east Asia. The East Asian-Australasian Flyway might become an historical phenomenon. So the book should be translated into Mandarin, Korean and the languages of other countries along the flyway. Harry does show that there are many people in China and South Korea and elsewhere working to preserve the habitats of the flyway. He notes a recent edict of the Chinese government that outlaws further "reclamation" of coastal wetlands. Perhaps Xi Jinping is an amateur ornithologist.

This little volume is more than a bird book though. It is also an engaging travel yarn taking us on a journey through time and space and telling us about the curlew's past and present relationships with human communities along its path. It is written with great care (grammar pedants like I am won't be troubled) and there are many poetic passages. Readers, when next finding themselves before a windswept stretch of coastal mudflat will see a new beauty. And, with Harry's description of the behaviour of curlews and their companions in mind, readers who happen to catch sight of these creatures will watch them with a new eye.

The book is available as an e book from Booktopia, but the hardback version is a delight to the eye and the hand and to have and to hand around.

The Bar-tailed Godwit is one of the flyers of the East Asian Australasian Flyway. I had seen it on Australian shores but until a trip to New Zealand I didn't know it holds the record for the longest non-stop flight. I had to try to express my wonder in poetry:

GOD'S WITTY LITTLE HERO

There's no creature of greater fortitude
None flies a flight of such magnitude
Long before the Maori found the ocean land
they call Aotearoa
this little sturdy bird
the bar-tailed godwit
happened on it

Since time unknown across the Pacific it has flown
Siberia's summer insects fill its belly
And fattened well its wings beat day and night
high above the ocean's swell
until on far south sands it does alight
just half the weight since it took flight

Seems the bird's well named
Such splendid navigation
a godlike wit indeed suggests
But why this great migration?
Surely warm and fruitful sands
fringe many of the lands
near its long path

Maybe some great wind of yore
did bear a little band
to this new shore
far from where they'd planned